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ABSTRACT

Marion Sheridan, President of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1949-50, questioned traditional values, defending or assaulting them as the circumstances of a rapidly changing world deemed necessary. The voice that spoke through her writing was instrumental in modifying English curriculum. She pioneered the use of film in the English classroom, was ahead of her time in emphasizing writing processes in relation to learning, advocated writing across the curriculum, and introduced the practice of publishing student writing. Sheridan committed her professional life to working with colleagues to help students in English classes become active inquirers. Furthermore, she saw the English language arts, in all their interdependent, interactive modes, as forces to enable students to learn about, to question, and to work toward the betterment of their society and their world. In every period of her 60-year career Marion Sheridan championed creativity in the secondary classroom, advocating the study of literature and of writing. She also underscored the role of teachers as taking on the complex and tremendous responsibility of organizing their learning environments to enable all this to happen. (KEH)

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MARION SHERIDAN: TAPPING THE IMAGINATION

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Marion Sheridan, President of NCTE in 1949-50, is best known for her work with the Teaching Film Custodians, but that is only part of the reason we are honoring her in this session today and in the soon-to-be-published Missing Chapters. That she pioneered the use of film in the English classroom; that she was ahead of her time in emphasizing writing processes; publishing student writing, and advocating writing across the curriculum; that she was an actively contributing member of NCTE for almost sixty years and of the New England Association of Teachers for more than sixty years, serving twice as its President; and that she committed her professional life to working with colleagues to help students in English classes become active inquirers: these are the reasons for our spotlight on Marion Sheridan today. "A lifetime commitment" are the words used by Al Grommon to summarize his oral-history interview with Marion in July of 1977. What follows is a part of just one of many possible stories that this "lifetime commitment" could have engendered.

As Faulkner, one of Marion's best-loved authors, dramatically illustrates in the structure of Absolom! Absolom, to reconstruct the past is to challenge the hazards of imprecise memory, partial glimpses, preconceived expectations and biases, and real-world limitations of time and access to as much information as one would like. Marion, herself, during her interview with Grommon, cautions him, and any listeners, to "Be very careful when working from these vague remembrances." With

this caution in mind, I have relied on a combination of talks with and letters from Marion's colleagues and contemporaries as well as on articles she authored during the 40's, 50's, and 60's. Out of these has emerged the following sketch of Marion Sheridan.

She was born during the 1890's in New Haven, Connecticut, acquired her B.S. degree at Columbia University, her M.A. at Yale in 1928, and her Ph.D, also at Yale, in 1934. She began her teaching career in 1913 at Connecticut High School, then moved in 1914 to James T. Hillhouse High School in New Haven, the same high school she had graduated from four years earlier. Here she stayed, becoming Chair of the English Department in 1931, a position she held until her retirement in 1961. Her professional concerns, however, did not retire. After retirement from teaching, she became a self-employed English language consultant from 1961 until her death in 1979; she served as Archivist for the New England School and College Conference on English; served as Chair of the World Heritage Film and Book program; she was a member of the Connecticut Service Council Steering Committee for WNAC-TV from 1963-1966, and served as liaison between the American Association of University Women and WTNH-TV from 1966 until the mid-70's; and also, in 1966, almost 70 years of age, she participated in a panel at the International Federation of University Women in Paris. In her spare time, she maintained work-in-progress on a history of the teaching of Reading in New Haven, Connecticut, a continuation of her dissertation: "The

Teaching of Reading in the Public Schools of New Haven, 1638-1930."

In addition to her nearly 60 year affiliation with NCTE, during which she spent 17 years as chair of the Committee on Film, Marion was also a member of the American Association of University Women, serving as President of the Connecticut Division from 1954-1958 and as President of the New Haven Branch from 1963-1965. Her more than 60 year affiliation with the New Haven Association of Teachers of English culminated in her being awarded a life membership. She was also awarded lifetime memberships to the New Haven Colony Historical Society and the Columbia Scholastic Press Association.

Her contributions to these committees were honored by more than life memberships. The new Haven Branch of the American Association of University Women gives an annual scholarship in Marion Sheridan's name and honor. She was awarded the Gold Key to the Columbia Scholastic Press Association in 1949; was given an NCTE citation for "Outstanding Contribution to the Teaching of English in Secondary Schools" in 1958; received Yale University's Distinguished Teacher Award for "Outstanding Service in Secondary Schools" in 1962; and the Education Press of America award in 1973.

All the above are touchstones, markers of the paths that

Marion chose to tread throughout her professional career. They are silent testimonials to the directions of her continued dedication, but they say little about the substance of that dedication. More substantive is the voice that speaks through her writing. Here we find Marion Sheridan, the teacher, who faced classes of high school English students in the community she grew up in and lived in, day after day, year after year, decade after decade for forty-eight years; here we find Marion Sheridan, the colleague, who shared her insights and concerns with fellow educators as they sought together ways to improve the teaching of English; here we find Marion Sheridan, post-war President of NCTE, questioning traditional values, defending or assaulting them as the circumstances of a rapidly changing world deemed necessary. Several themes weaved throughout her writing, but major among them are her notions of creativity, the importance of literature, the role of film in the English classroom, the significance of writing in relation to learning, and the roles of teacher and student in their interactions with English and the language arts. Since Marion, in her interview with Grommon, singled out her attention to creativity as the dominant theme in her pedagogical interests, I will use her views on creativity to serve as the Faulknerian pebble that ripples into the ever-widening areas of her pedagogical concerns.

During the late 20's, Marion had been inspired by Hughes Mearns' Creative Youth: How a School Environment Set Free the

Creative Spirit. She began to experiment with creative projects in her classroom, particularly with writing. She encouraged her students to publish what they had written, and pioneered the publication of high school literary journals at Hillhouse High School with her establishment of the still functioning Literary Magazine. Although the publication of student work is an integral part of today's English classrooms (at least in the rhetoric of current pedagogy), Marion assured us, during her chat with Grommon, that "these creative aspects were perceived as very novel at the time."

Creativity is a focal point in Marion's 1949 Presidential Address, entitled "Beyond Fancy's Dream," wherein she speaks of a non-creative, skills-oriented conception of English teaching as

> degrading. It reduces English to too low a level, to a sum of unrelated parts. It confines English to mechanics, to externals, to outward shells, to husks (1950, 62).

She goes on to say that

> English to develop powers of individual students beyond fancy's dream must be directed to the human, creative side of a person whose dignity is respected.

This theme of creativity is more fully developed a decade later in her article to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the English Journal, "Creative Language Experiences in the High

School." Early in her discussion, she writes:

> We cannot think of what our world calls for without realizing that today it is most important to stimulate the creative. That has not always been the aim of education. In some civilizations. . . the aim was to memorize, to follow the past, to insure conformity. In contrast in all aspects of education today, there is an urgent need for the creative (1960, 563).

Marion would offer firm argument to those anachronistic educators who still think that the "creative" is only for those students already competent in basic skills. She writes about the importance of creative learning experiences for students in technical-vocational as well as university-bound classes, implying the hazards of classifying students into rigid categories, and foreseeing the burgeoning flow of adult learners into tertiary education:

> In pleading for the creative, I am well aware that people have been classified at least tentatively as creative, less creative, and non-creative. I have hope that there can be some shift in these classifications. . . . The creative approach regards no one as hopeless. . . for all students. . . the creative approach seems to be a wise one, discovering all that is potential in young people of varied backgrounds. This approach is appropriate for those who know they are going to

> college, for those who hope they are going, who may never go, and the increasing group of those who may go, not immediately after secondary school but at some later date (563-5).

Marion's creative approach embraced all aspects of the English curriculum she developed for her own classroom and for the English department at Hillhouse H. S. Her 1952 article, "Teaching a Novel," directly shows this relationship between her notions of "the creative approach" and the study and enjoyment of literature:

> Faith in the value of teaching a novel may be based upon belief in the significance of the imaginative (1952,9).

Post-war pragmatism, however, posed a threat to the teaching of literature to all students with the move toward early streaming of university-bound and vocational-bound students. This threat prompted Marion, in her status as incoming president of NCTE, to make public her concerns, both in talks given to teachers in new England and in her article, "Life Without Literature" (EJ, 1948) which condensed these talks. Her abhorrence for the move to eliminate literature from the course of studies for non-university bound students is shown when she parodies the contending viewpoint, coming, in her professional passion, as close to an almost vitriolic diatribe as I have

encountered in her writings:

> Some educators contend that to study vocational material in a broad and in narrow sense, to study budgeting, or safe driving, is more valuable than to study literature. Literature may be said to have little to offer, to be a frill: poetry should be for the poetical; novels for the elect; literature an elective or an omission. . . . Yes, literature is for you and for me, but not for those others. They are different, you know. They do not grasp ideas. They do not feel. They can use their hands. They must have the practical. Think of the individual students in public high schools, of their wide range of color, ability, religion, environment, background, receptiveness. Statistically and arbitrarily we say, "No literature," and we may go on: "No literature for I.Q. 95, or 90, or below." Perhaps one of our next studies should be to determine statistically the exact mathematical point at which literature should be out. It may be, however, that literature should be in: since at least the time of the Bible and of Aesop a story has been an effective way of presenting an idea (1948, 292-294).

Not only was the teaching of literature at risk in Marion's day; so was writing. In her 1951 article, "Can We Teach our

Students to Write?", Marion refers to the Wisconsin study, reported on by Pooley in The Teaching of English in Wisconsin in 1948, wherein teachers estimated that eighteen to nineteen per cent of total English time was devoted to written composition, "one theme in nine days, about 125 words per week" (Pooley, 1948). Marion's suggestion that "at least three times as much writing should be done if students are to learn to express themselves on paper" (1951, 323) would be regarded today as gross understatement, yet it was offered long before the critical relationship between writing and learning had been widely acknowledged.

Even more prescient of current pedagogical emphases was Marion's desire to establish co-operative writing links across departments, in a version of writing across the curriculum that positions teachers of all subject areas as educators concerned with their students' use of written language:

> Theoretically, in the teaching of writing we should get assistance from all the teachers of all our students. There is, however, still much for us to learn about co-operation with those of other departments. It is decidedly worth making an effort to increase the power of writing by teamwork (1951, 321).

She cautions English teachers about separating writing from other language arts and activities. At a time when Language Arts

and English curricula categorized speaking, listening, writing, and reading as separate areas, and long before the work of Douglas Barnes, James Britton, and Deborah Tannen emphasized the importance of student talk in language learning, Marion writes:

> Effective communication in writing is inseparable from communication by speaking, reading, and listening. . . . Chatting may stress the exceedingly important question of the order (1951, 322).

As she stressed the importance of a socialized approach to the study of literature, so Marion also developed an increasingly collaborative approach to writing. The following could as easily describe activities in a 1990's classroom as in her 1950's one:

> The activity was largely student activity: students raised questions and answered each other; students asked for help from the class and in conferences. All stages of the undertaking were subject to group discussion (1954, 87).

Marion consistently locates her views of teaching and learning in the actual classrooms of the teachers she is addressing, with advice not on "how to" but on "what must be done" or, as in the following instance, "what must not be overdone":

> Communication does not result from a terrifying emphasis on usage or on grammar, even though pronouns should have antecedents and participles should not

dangle (1951, 322).

Her 1960 article, "Creative Language Experience in the High School" offers advice even closer to the current emphasis on helping students to locate their personal life experiences in ongoing textual and intertextual written conversations:

> We can help students to write what they will have to write. We can broaden the scope of what they will have to write about and wish to write about; we can give them an idea of how to do it. Students may write of what is on the streets, on the country roads, in books, in lectures, over the radio, in conversation (1960, 566).

She develops her ideas on the role of teachers in her address to the general session of NCTE in 1948:

> As teachers and particularly as teachers of the language arts, we play a prominent part in the equilibrium of our students. Environment, training, and ability influence the way our students dance on their tightropes, remain on a plateau, or climb mountains. And we become part of their environment and of their training, stultifying or stimulating toward the dynamic. Without vanity, we say that consciously and unconsciously we control actions, thought, emotion. We challenge and elicit responses. . . we can stimulate to maturity, to growth in self-esteem, and self-

direction. . . WE forget it in our busy days, but the power of teachers is staggering (1949, 126-7).

These remarks are an indication of how far-reaching Marion's conception of pedagogy , and of the roles of teachers on the classroom, extends. She sees the English language arts, in all their interdependent, interactive modes, as forces to enable students to learn about, to question, and to work toward the betterment of their society and their world. She sees the role of teachers as taking on the complex and tremendous responsibility of organizing their learning environments to enable all this to happen. She concludes her address with words that will also conclude my address to you -- with a message intended to inspire teachers to meet the challenge:

> Where does all this leave us? It leaves us concerned about people, about individuals, about human beings, who may be too easily passed over, who may be expected to be paragons. It leaves us concerned about the delicate nature of balance in group relationships. As teachers of English... we work with human beings, as fellow teachers, as students, and as the subject or the author of writing. WE work with the speech of human beings and the words written and heard with which they communicate. Students must gain certain automatisms for their tightrope dancing. But they must go beyond the mechanical and mechanics toward equilibrium -- with

variations. They must go on scaling mountains and reaching for the stars (1949, 129-30).